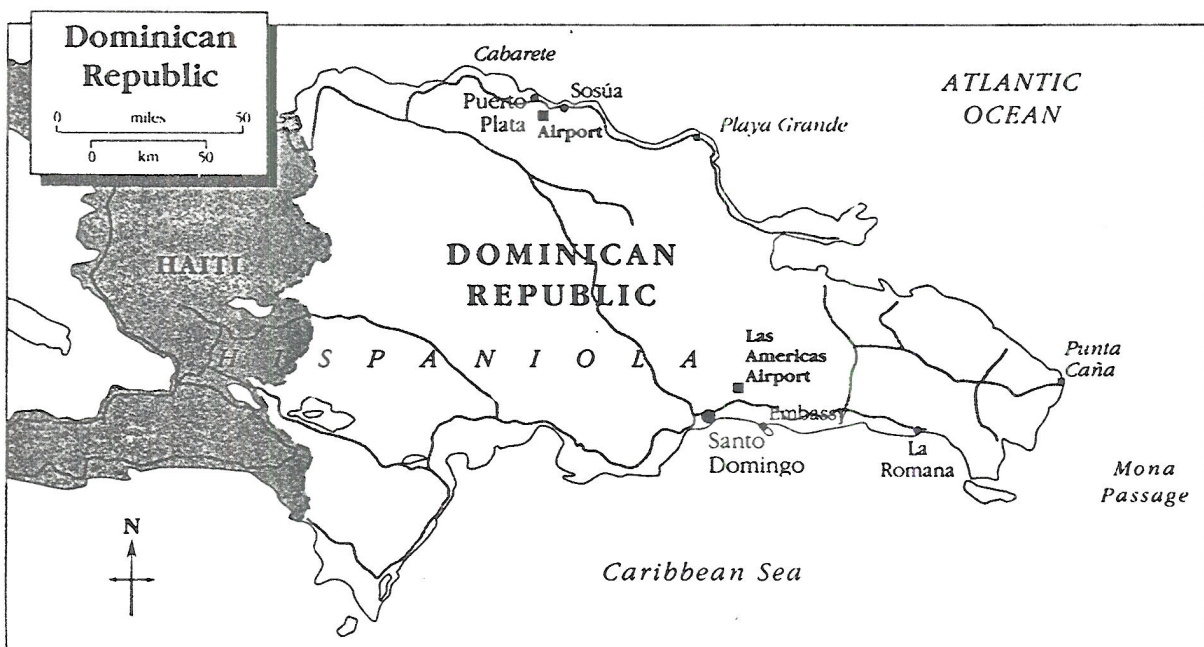


CUEVAS Y HABICHUELLAS

Or: What I did in the summer holidays

Why, you may ask, did we decide to go to the Dominican Republic to go caving? In fact, most people start off with, "where is the Dominican Republic?", knowing only that it's somewhere hot and possibly on the other side of the Atlantic. The Dominican Republic is in the Caribbean and takes up most of the island of Hispaniola, the rest being Haiti. It is Spanish speaking and the capital, Santo Domingo, is the oldest European city in the New World, being where Columbus landed in 1492. Its other claim to fame is that it has large amounts of limestone, much of it in the form of mountains. This makes it ideal for cave formation. In addition, unlike some of the Caribbean islands, it has had very little attention from cavers, so we were hoping to find so pretty good stuff.

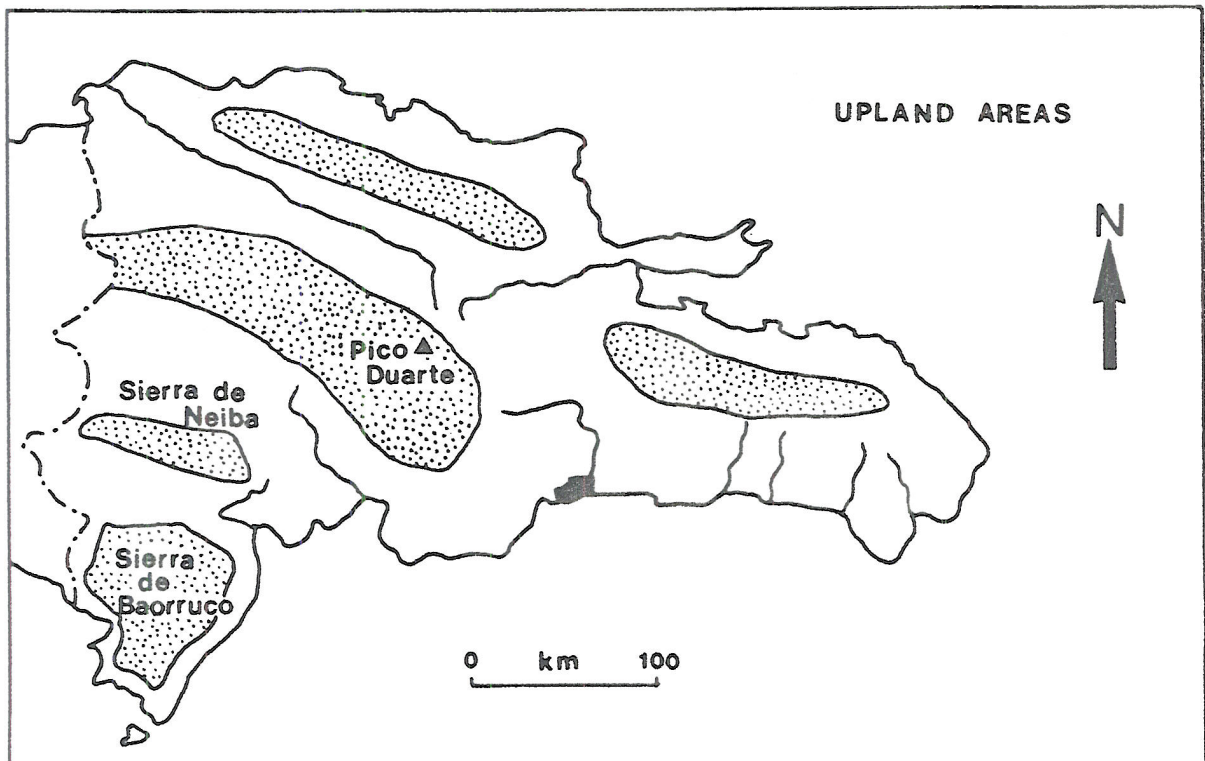


By the time that we actually left in July, I was starting to feel as though we had been organising the expedition since shortly after I was born, and that we were cursed to carry on organising it until shortly after I died! Despite this foreboding, however, a couple of days before our flight six of us congregated in Beit Quad to sort out the gear and do all the things that we had to do before we left but hadn't got around to (such as pay for the airline tickets). Eventually we actually set off, weighed down with tents, suncream, Spanish phrasebooks, and the vast amounts of assorted ironmongery and rope without which the modern caver does not feel properly dressed.

The flight there was uneventful apart from some fast talking, and then some fast pleading, to get all of our "just a little bit overweight" bags on with no extra charge. We arrived in Las Americas airport late in the evening, loaded our gear into a couple of taxis and asked to be taken to a cheap hotel in Santo Domingo. The taxi driver evidently had a different idea of cheap to us, as the Royal Hotel was far too upmarket for us being

clean, with glass in the windows and air conditioning. The next day, therefore, we set about finding somewhere a bit seedier (and cheaper), and found it in the shape of the Hotel Turista - no glass in the windows, concrete floors, cockroaches in abundance, and two complimentary condoms under each pillow. We decided to move in the next day, but two more members of the expedition, Harry and Dewi, were arriving that afternoon so we met them and moved them straight in. Their comments on seeing our hotel were not very pleasant.

After a couple of days in the capital organising permits and suchlike we crammed into the cheapest van we could rent, and set off to our first destination: Los Bolos, high in the Sierra de Neiba. On the way Rob Chaddock drove the van into a kerb and blew a tyre, but apart from that we got to Guayabal, which was as far as the road went, surprisingly easily. At Guayabal we were immediately surrounded by the locals, all talking very fast in Spanish, but luckily help was at hand in the form of the U.S. Peace Corps, called Jill (complete with shoulderpads). With Jill's help we hired mules for the next morning, when we walked up to Los Bolos in the pouring rain. During this walk-in my shampoo escaped, and ate my passport and travellers' cheques. We stayed at Los Bolos for three days during which time one of the local men, Salvador, showed us all of the caves that he knew of. Unfortunately most of them were blocked, but we explored two to around 70 m. depth, where they petered out. It was at Los Bolos that we were first introduced to the delights of boiled unripe bananas for every meal.



After Los Bolos failed to live up to expectations we split up. Half the team headed back down to Guayabal to pick up the van and check out an area called Sabana Real, which was right on the Haitian border, while the others headed for a plateau above Los Bolos where, we were assured by all, we would find, "muchos cuevas". Salvador came too to show us where all the caves were. The plateau was an absolutely delightful place to camp, but unfortunately it had been deforested some twenty-five years previously, and the increased soil erosion had caused all of the stream sinks to have become filled with mud. We did find one surface shaft that was 70 m. deep, but this too was blocked at the bottom. So, after three days there we got up before dawn, packed all our gear, and set off to walk to Guayabal,

hopefully before it got too hot. We nearly made it there before the heat, but not quite. By the time we finally struggled in, Phil was suffering quite badly from dehydration and had to be sat in the shade and fed water until he could stand up again. Dehydration was a continual problem during our stay as the amount that it is possible to sweat when walking uphill with a heavy pack in 35 degree heat is unbelievable.

At Guayabal we were met by Bron with the news that the van was stuck at Sabana Real with another puncture. So, we spent the night at La Descubierta, which was as far as we could get that night, and the next day we got a guagua (local slang for any vehicle from an air-conditioned luxury bus to a battered old pick-up, privately owned, which form the public transport network) to Sabana Real. Halfway up the horrendously steep and bumpy track to there, and just as it was looking like the old and abused guagua was going to die completely, we nearly ran into our van coming around a corner on its way down. So we were all reunited, and with the news that there were no good caves at Sabana Real, we retreated to Barahona, the largest town in the area. Here we stopped to decide what to do next and to enjoy the luxuries available there, such as beer.

Eventually most of the team departed for an area called Polo, while I stayed in Barahona with Gideon, who was rather ill. We were there for two days (during which time we were threatened by the local protection mob) until the rest returned with the news that Polo had no holes to speak of. So, we set off for a new destination, Loma Meregildo, again near Guayabal. Unfortunately the van then died, so we were stuck in Barahona for two days awaiting the hire firm's "twenty-four hour breakdown service". It was here that we discovered beetroot milk shakes made with evaporated milk, sugar, ice and fresh beetroot. Yummy.

So, eventually, we got to Loma Meregildo, only to find it as unpromising as everywhere else that we had looked. With this we decided to write of the mountains of the south-west of the country and to head for the central highlands. These mountains, which include the highest in the Caribbean (Pico Duarte, 3175 m.) are mostly of igneous rock, but there is a band of limestone running along the southern side. We were aiming for a valley called Catanamatias, where a previous Italian expedition had explored a cave to about 400 m. deep, the deepest in the country.

Catanamatias turned out to be a very beautiful valley at about 800 m. with mountains rising to 2000 m. around it. I was also liberally dotted with hopeful looking holes. The local people proudly showed us the cave which the Italians had explored two years previously and seemed surprised that we didn't want to go down it. They caught on quickly, though, and soon one had offered to show us all of the caves that he knew of in the valley. The next day Harry, Phil and I set off for a nearby valley at 1400 m. which involved crossing a 1800 m. ridge, while the others checked out Catanamatias and the nearby hills. Although we had planned to return that evening, it started to rain very heavily once we reached the valley and so we spent the night sheltering in a bean shed belonging to one of the local farmers. The following day we checked out the valley, which looked very promising. While Harry and Phil investigated the nearby holes I walked down to the other end of the valley, which hadn't suffered so much from the pyromaniacal style of agriculture which was in use in the area. After some machete work I found a stream flowing directly into a large black opening, with logs jammed across it to show how much water went there in the rainy season. I returned to our bean shed to find that Harry had descended one cave until running out of rope at about 60 m. depth, and with the cave wide open and still going.



Surface shaft in the Catanamatias area. Photo by Rob Knell.

We returned to Catanamatias that afternoon, excited and rather tired, to find that the team down in the valley had met with similar success having identified a number of possible "going" caves. We decided to concentrate on Catanamatias and the nearby hills for the moment as it would be very difficult logistically to maintain a team in the higher valley for any length of time.

Over the next three or four days we looked at all of the holes in the valley floor that we could find, and although most of them proved to be choked with mud and rocks we found a few open ones. Phil and I explored a cave to 63 m. depth, where we were stopped by a sump. The cave contained a rather entertaining squeeze, which I managed to get stuck in much to the amusement of some of the expedition "hard men". We later named this cave "Cueva Queso", because I collected some insects in there and the rather old cheese that I used as bait gave the whole place a most attractive fragrance. A number of other caves were explored, including one on the mountain to the west of the valley, which was looking very promising. At this point, however, our enthusiasm became rather damped as the great food crisis started to bite.

We had gone up to Catanamatias with four days food as we didn't know how long we were going to be staying there. It quickly became obvious that we were going to be there for a while, so after we had made the food last six days, three of us went back down the hill with the intention of going to the nearest town, San Juan, and buying more food. When we reached Los Copeyes, though, we were told that there was a two day general strike on, that there were bombs going off in San Juan, that there were no guaguas running anyway and generally that we weren't going anywhere. So we went back to wait for the strike to finish. We weren't starving, because rice and beans were both easily available, but although the locals seemed content to eat nothing but rice and beans (they didn't have any of that other staple, bananas) our sophisticated western palates demanded more. This they didn't get. To cut a long story short, relief finally arrived when we had had nothing but rice and beans for three days, and virtually nothing but rice and beans for quite a while longer. This may sound trivial now, but at the time it seemed very important.

After we had spent a while stuffing our faces with chocolate biscuits and regaining our strength, we got back to caving. Chris and myself set off for the cave on the hill to descend a large shaft which was the limit of exploration before the rice and beans incident. The shaft was almost directly after a revolting muddy squeeze, which Chris had previously dug out by hand, and there were loose boulders everywhere. We descended to the shaft via a series of small pitches and the aforementioned squeeze, tied our rope off to a large block of rock and Chris set off down. The shaft turned out to be about 45 m. deep and most impressive. It was blocked with boulders at the bottom, but a window a few metres up led onto another shaft. This turned out to be deeper than our rope was, so we turned back leaving further exploration for another day. As I prusicked up the big shaft the rope was so muddy that my jammers kept slipping causing me some concern. Eventually this cave was explored and surveyed to its end at about 200 m. down. It was named, "Cueva El Avenger", after Chris' car, because "It's pretty appalling, but it goes".

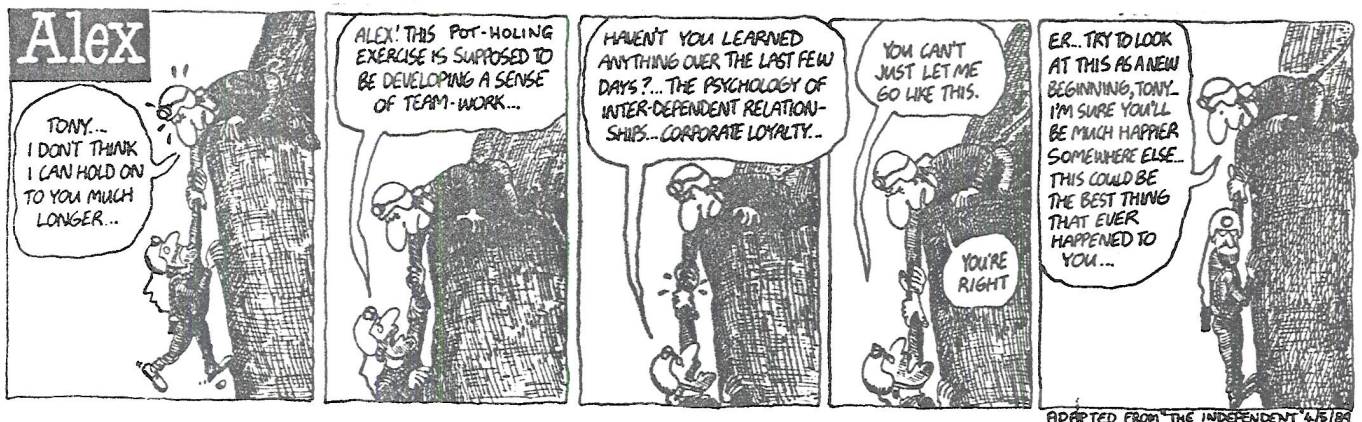
After we had completed exploration of Cueva El Avenger there wasn't much time left, but six of us went up to the higher valley that had been visited earlier, to explore as much as we could in the time remaining. As it was we were all suffering from attacks of appalling lassitude (a well known tropical disease) so all that got done was the exploration of the cave

Harry had part explored earlier. We got down to about 100 m. deep after which we could see the passage carrying on down. This was the best cave of the whole expedition being real fun to descend, and it is a great pity that we only had three days there as the potential of the whole area is enormous. We named the cave, "Cueva Machete", because it had a lot of very sharp rock in it, and Dewi managed to cut his hand quite badly the first day we were up there.

We returned to Santo Domingo and then flew to New York with our Kuwait Airlines tickets but because of the Iraqi invasion these got us no further. Luckily we eventually managed to scrounge our way onto a Virgin Atlantic flight, which was probably nicer than Kuwait airlines would have been anyway.

All in all I think it was a pretty successful trip: we found a lot of new caves but more importantly I think we all got a lot out of it as people, and saw parts of the country that you would never normally go to on the tourist trails.

Rob Knell



Strange, but true !

On one occasion during a cave rescue in the USA, the casualty's electrocardiograph was transmitted from the accident site to the surface by telephone cable, and then by radio to hospital where a cardiologist was able to report that it was normal - hardly surprising, as the only injury was a broken leg!

In Grenoble, France, a cave rescue team felt that all medical resources should be available to the caver injured underground, including major surgery. To demonstrate the feasibility of this a large medical team, including anaesthetists, surgeons, nurses, and vast amounts of equipment were transported down a cave. Not surprisingly they could get no human volunteers, so a dog was carried down the cave and a splenectomy successfully carried out on the unsuspecting canine. The surgery was uneventful, but the dog only narrowly escaped a fatal strangulation during the trip out on a stretcher designed for humans.

Reference: "Caving Practice & Equipment", Ed. D. Judson.